

UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
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**GIVING WOMEN'S BODIES BACK TO WOMEN:
REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN
LOUISE ERDRICH'S NOVEL *FUTURE HOME OF THE LIVING GOD***

BA Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Religion and the United States government have a long history of conflict that is still a matter of debate today. The conflict between a woman's body and laws regulating abortion has become one of the most controversial political topics in American society. The aim of this paper is to analyze Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* for elements of feminist dystopia and to demonstrate how it engages with the current political and religious tension regarding women's rights and reproduction. The main purpose is to find out how Erdrich is able to create a dystopian world that closely reflects the current situation in the United States of America.

The introduction of this thesis gives an overview of the current situation of women's rights and how they are affected by an increasing presence of religion in American politics. The literature review discusses utopian and dystopian features in literature. The empirical section brings out the elements of the novel that categorize it as a feminist dystopia. The conclusion summarizes the connection between religion and women's rights and how it is represented in literature.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world where women do not own their bodies. Women are bombarded with contradictory messages. Pregnancy is magnificent. Pregnancy is terrifying. Being a woman is empowering. Being a woman is being vulnerable. Childbirth, a topic that should be personal and intimate, is instead a complex political challenge that seems to affect the entire United States of America. Reproductive rights that are a result of a long political struggle, continue to be threatened by religious fundamentalism and by its influence on the United States government.

The first oral contraceptive was approved in the USA in the middle of the 20th century (Planned Parenthood 2015b: 1). The Supreme Court case of *Griswold v. Connecticut* permitted married couples to use contraceptives, through the argument that it was covered by the right to privacy (Planned Parenthood 2015a: 1). The right to choose whether to carry a pregnancy to term or to terminate it was established in the *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court decision in 1973, again using the right to privacy argument (Binion 1988: 39). *Roe v Wade* was the landmark case in US constitutional law that established abortion as a federal constitutional right (Weiner 2016: 1).

However, these rights have been challenged by the increasingly powerful religious lobby, using freedom of religion as an argument to exclude reproductive rights coverage from insurance policies and hospital groups affiliated with religious organizations (Robinson 2015: 1070). The claim is that restricting religion and religious values from political debate and resulting laws violate the right of religious citizens to freely exercise their religion, provided by the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment (Robinson 2015: 1069). This process has only continued under the administration of President Donald Trump who has proposed to make changes to the Title X family planning program (Warren 2018). Currently, Title X provides grants to 91 state health departments and non-

profit health agencies to provide contraceptive services, treatment for sexually transmitted infections, and referral to primary care to around 4 million clients each year (Bronstein 2018:1). The proposed changes will minimize access to medically accurate information about abortion services (Warren 2018).

Another challenge is the direct targeting of Planned Parenthood which is one of the largest providers of Title X services (Warren 2018). Cuts in the Planned Parenthood budget make a large impact. When Texas cut funding for Planned Parenthood from \$111 million to only \$38 million, one out of every four family planning clinics in the state closed (Potter and White 2017). As a result, in 2011 teen birth and abortion rates rose (Warren 2018).

Many of these policies are driven by the evangelical lobby groups who are an important percentage of the support for Republican politicians. For example, in the 2016 election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump (Dowland 2018: 1). Many evangelicals believe that the Bible is literally the truth, every word (Emerson and Hartman 2006: 139). Evangelical groups have existed in the US for centuries, but they conventionally did not actively participate in politics. The influence of evangelicals in politics increased thanks to Jerry Falwell, an evangelical Southern Baptist pastor who was highly influential in mobilizing the evangelicals as a political movement and the creation of the Moral Majority (Banwart 2013: 135). The Moral Majority, the organization that Falwell created, claimed in just one year more than eighty thousand members for its mailing list and a political war chest of millions of dollars (Banwart 2013: 148).

Indeed, Moral Majority's main driver was the legalization of abortion in the 1970's (Banwart 2018: 133). The age of large-scale political and social resistance to the Roe ruling ultimately coincided with the organized political mobilization of the Religious Right that coalesced in the late 1970s (McVicar 2018: 11). To the Moral Majority what they

believed to be “anti-family” legislation meant risking the wrath of God (Banwart 2018: 134). The evangelical idea of family was very narrow and reproductive rights seemed to challenge it. If women could get an abortion, they then did not need a man to take care of them, would not be confined to the kitchen or the household, and this would result in a newfound independence that would shatter the traditional nuclear family which they full-heartedly believed to be what God desired (Banwart 2018: 139). During this time, women began embracing their independence in deciding about when to have children (Faludi 1991: 441) In a 1990 survey, almost 40 percent of women believed that when having an abortion, a man should not even be consulted (Faludi 1991: 441). All of this slowly took away the power away from men. To counter these processes, the Moral Majority energized the religious right in an array of activities such as voter registration, lobbying, and fund-raising against reproductive rights (Britannica 2018).

While Moral Majority died when Falwell stepped down, this type of conservative political activism was not over. An organization called the Christian Coalition brought evangelicals to the peak of their political power during the George W. Bush administration (Dowland 2018: 7). As a result, *evangelical* became more firmly a political term in the early 2000s (Dowland 2018: 7). The current President Donald Trump has also made decisions that promote the evangelical agenda. For example, in January 2018, the U.S Department of Health and Human Services announced the formation of a new Conscience and Religious Freedom Division in the Office for Civil Right (U.S Department of Health and Human Services 2018). This division allows health care providers to refuse to perform, accommodate, or assist with certain health care services on religious or moral grounds (U.S Department of Health and Human Services 2018). As a result, many pharmacists in some states refuse to carry emergency contraception either because they believe it can cause an abortion or have been intimidated by the religious right and their

growing power (Grabiner 2011: 4). A hospital administrator could cancel a woman's life-saving treatment for cancer because it might harm her pregnancy (Planned Parenthood N.d). The religious right speaks about protecting life, but they also want programs such as broad healthcare that could support people who want to start or raise families, to be cut from the U.S budget (Grabiner 2011: 4).

In regards to sex education, only 13 states in the USA require sex education to be medically accurate and several states do not mandate sexual education and instead stress abstinence (Nursing USC Staff 2017). In fact, in 2018 Congress passed the 2018 Consolidated Appropriations Act which included a \$10 million funding increase for an abstinence-only Sexual Risk Avoidance Education grant program (Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation 2018.) During the Bush administration, over two-thirds of abstinence-only education programs were using curricula that have several scientific and medical inaccuracies (Waxmen 2004: 22).

All of these political moves against reproductive rights have fueled feminist activism. This activism has also created literary responses such as in Louise Erdrich's latest novel *Future Home of the Living God*. While Erdrich's novels have received a lot of attention in the context of Native American literature, her latest novel has not yet been a subject of academic study at the point of writing the present thesis. The media reception this far, covered in detail later in the thesis, stresses the dystopian element and this is why I want to analyze this novel in the context of a feminist dystopia, focusing on how the novel represents the current blending of religion and politics in relation to women's rights. To achieve that aim, first I will discuss dystopia and feminist dystopia in particular, before analyzing dystopian features in Erdrich's novel.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Utopia and dystopia

According to Susan Magarey (2014: 123), the term ‘utopia’ means a ‘good place’ or ‘no place’, essentially a ‘perfect and ideal’ world. The term ‘dystopia’ refers to a much darker and problematic scenario (Wilson 2018: 1). These scenarios stem from a major issue, such as religious fundamentalism, and show what may happen if the issue is pushed to the extreme. A piece of work that portrays dystopian scenarios can function as a warning example of what could happen if certain agendas gain power (Wilson 2018: 1). According to Thagrith Wachiradetsakul (n.d. 1), while dystopias are set in the future, they are often very concerned with the present.

Dystopian and utopian novels can be classified as science fiction, according to Naomi Mercer (2015: 144). While science fiction is a great vehicle for expressing progressive social theories to a popular audience, they tend to focus on male-centered quest narratives. She claims that this allure of science and technology works as a means for male protagonists to exert power and control over their societies and shape them in the way that suits them (Mercer 2015: 144). Klingensmith agrees that women and nature are cut out of classic male-authored dystopian works which, instead, favor technology and male characters. She believes that works by women give more emphases on women and nature without disregarding technology (Klingensmith 2016: 1). Dystopias tend to be driven by social criticism of some sort. Therefore, some critics argue that the characters in dystopian novels are too lifeless and unrealistic (Gulick 1991: 12). However, what many may miss is the idea that sometimes extensive psychological development and dramatic tension can be counterproductive to the aim of the texts which focus on the reactions of humans who are trapped literally and mentally (Gulick 1991: 12). The main purpose of

this type of writing is to allow the author to use literature as a vehicle to examine contemporary social and political issues that could, if left unattended, bring about undesirable consequences. In other words, dystopias want to send a warning to the audience (Wachiradetsakul 1).

As Susan Magarey (2014:123-124) has stated, citing Anne L. Mellor (1982: 244), feminist dystopia forged a close link with science fiction and this provided the opportunity to test certain scenarios that are related to societal organization and ethical codes. Many of the ethical codes in the case of feminist science fiction are related to reproduction and mothering. Jennings (2008: 65) argues, building on the ideas of Luce Irigaray, that due to women's reproductive status being historically privileged as the only guarantee of female identity, motherhood often "gets wrapped up in some weird kind of holiness". The womb acquires a sacred status which is then used to justify the subjugation of women (Jennings 2008: 66).

From a different perspective, Ildney Cavalcanti (2000: 1) argues that futuristic dystopias are stories about language. There is a tendency for women writers to be silenced by men in reading, writing (specifically creative writing), and access to public speech (so that the female protagonists to communicate by following a script as opposed to speaking freely) (Cavalcanti 2000: 1) Elsa Klingensmith (2016: 1) states that there is a tendency for women writers to emphasize characters and issues that were previously silenced and omitted from the narrative by male authors. Contemporary feminist dystopias distinctly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as an instrument of both men's domination and women's liberation (Cavalcanti 2000: 1) Linguistic control and the enforcement of strict linguistic normativity symbolically stand for other forms of social (or political) control (Cavalcanti 2000: 1). As

a result, the ability to alter reality in dystopian novels with language is a reoccurring theme (Desmet 2010: 39).

Several feminist science fiction writers, more specifically dystopian writers, have turned their attention to the rise of the Religious Right, religious fundamentalism and the shift to more conservative views in the United States that in the 1980s sought to limit women's civil rights (Mercer 2015: 158). Feminist writers are very attentive to the dangers of fundamentalism and how it has blended with American politics (Mercer 2015: 181). Mercer (2015: 249) believes that the insistence on "tradition" that is instilled in religious fundamentalism is one of the key factors in perpetuating the inequality of men and women in the world. Dystopian writing by women warns the audience about the main goal of fundamentalism, the control of a woman's fertility and, as a result, the full control of women (Mercer 2015: 227). Mercer points out that while in non-feminist utopian writing is often quite static, the feminist perspective blends utopia with a dystopia that is generally misogynistic and is purposefully trying to destroy the utopian society (Mercer 2016: 173).

The blending of genres and text styles allows feminist writers to present viewpoints on things such as organized religion and how organized religion is reflected in different aspects of identity (Mercer 2015: 188). Mercer (2015: 227) even argues that by having a voice in writing through the genre of feminist dystopia, female writers can expose and possibly change the ingrained misogyny in Western culture. They use features of the reader and/or writer's society and realities in order to expose its limitations and use a more personal form of expression to liberate (Desmet 2010: 38). Desmet (2010: 45) that the use of science fiction is for many female authors as a form of political resistance. They contribute to the exploration and breakdown of certainties and universalist assumptions, like damaging stereotypes about gendered identities by discussing themes such as the

representation of women and their bodies (Desmet 2010: 45). Dystopian texts can also become a vehicle of resistance by combining conventions from different genres and creating works characterized by hybridity (Desmet 2010: 45). They go against the typical narrative formula of science fiction yet still hold some of the genre characteristics and, in way, combine elements from other genres such as romance and fantasy (Mercer 2015: 173). Female authors operate between culture and genre and express themselves in the dominant language as well as trying to convey their personal point of view (Desmet 2010: 78).

One common example of feminist dystopia in scholarly literature is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which tells the story of a society that is focused on returning to "traditional values" (Nordström 2008: 2). This is a typical example of a dystopian society that is characterized by a lack of freedom, constant surveillance, impossibility of escape, and a hierarchical categorization of society (Kouhestani 2012: 131). This novel was written in 1986, when Christian fundamentalism and right-wing politicians in the USA urged women to return to the home to fulfil what was argued to be their "biological destiny" (Nordström 2008: 13). Kouhestani (2012: 131) explains that the aim of this dystopian novel is to warn the readers. The elements that have been discussed in Atwood's novel as an example of feminist dystopia are the use of religion as a means of control (e.g., Nordström 2008, Kouhestani 2012) and enforced reproduction (Grabiner 2011, Miceli 2018). Miceli (2018: 99) points out that the society of Gilead could have been inspired by the claims of the New Right in the 1980s, which wanted to give every man the God-given right to rule supreme at home and bring women back to the home. These are also the themes that we see in Louise Erdrich's novel that will be analyzed in the next section.

DYSTOPIAN ELEMENTS IN *Future Home of the Living God*

1.1 *Future Home of the Living God* Summary and Media Reception

Louise Erdrich's novel has been reviewed by daily newspapers, most of which view the novel as a dystopia. According to *The Washington Post*, while Erdrich has published an array of novels regarding the Ojibwe people of North Dakota, this novel is distinctly different and can be compared to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* raising the question whether another version of that tale is needed (Charles 2017). The New Hampshire Public Radio claims it as "a streamlined dystopian thriller" and believes that in general this is a perfect time for feminist dystopian fiction (Corrigan 2017). Erdrich's novel is described as revealing the wonders of childbirth in contrast to the horrors that can arise when the government and certain organizations take the intimate decisions related to reproduction directly out of women's hands (Lock 2018). The *LA Review of Books* states that this novel "evokes the feeling of crazy end times by showing how institutions have gone completely haywire even as most sensory objects are experienced and sought after in the same way" (Felicelli 2017). Felicelli (2017) also compares the novel to the work of authors, such as Atwood who describe things as they are, while Erdrich offers a more dream-like approach to dystopian fiction or a more intimate perspective (Felicelli 2017).

In an interview with Margaret Atwood, Louise Erdrich explains her admiration for *The Handmaid's Tale*, and its engagement with fundamentalist religion and how it is used to control women's bodies (Atwood and Erdrich 2017). This is why she created a world that is falling apart, in which little information is available when it is needed the most, and

in which the vulnerability of women's rights is a central concern (Atwood and Erdrich 2017).

Future Home of the Living God tells the story of Cedar Hawk Songmaker, an adopted child of "Minneapolis liberals" (Erdrich 2017: 3) who was born as Mary Potts into the Ojibwe Native American tribe. She embraces Catholicism to rebel against her adoptive parents who are Buddhists, but mainly to get the connections offered within a parish that is like an extended family. However, Cedar has a big secret. She is 26 and pregnant. Before she tells her adoptive parents, she must first find her biological family and understand where she and her future baby come from. This sets Cedar on a personal journey to find her roots and brings her to an Ojibwe reservation where her biological family resides.

In the outside world, things are changing rapidly. Evolution is going backwards. Creatures are evolving in unfamiliar ways and babies are being born as more primitive versions of humans. This leads to Congress creating laws to confine pregnant women. The chances of giving birth to a normal child become rarer and these babies become extremely valuable. It becomes a crime for anyone to hide a pregnant woman and if anyone sees a pregnant woman, they must contact authorities. The street names are renamed after Bible verses and churches are adopted for federal use and form "The Church of the New Constitution" (Erdrich 2017: 108).

Cedar finds her biological family, but the government becomes more controlling. Eventually, she is caught and taken to a hospital. All the prisons and hospitals are now only meant for women. Cedar witnesses how different the world has become while being in the hospital. The only thing that matters is the baby. In most cases, the mother does not make it out of the hospital. Cedar shares the room with another mother, Tia, and they manage to escape. Cedar's adopted mother picks them up and they flee. Along the way, Tia gives birth, but the baby dies. Cedar makes it back to her family, but is caught again

and brought to a “birthing center” (Erdrich 2017: 249) which used to be a Correctional Facility. She gives birth to her baby, but is immediately separated from him. The story ends with Cedar still in the birthing center and thinking of her lost child and the future of the world.

In the following analysis, I will focus on the elements that make it a dystopian novel and more specifically a feminist dystopia: mainly religion and reproduction and briefly the role of language manipulation and how science fiction elements are being used.

1.2 Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* as a feminist dystopia

There are many elements that classify this novel as a dystopia and more specifically, a feminist dystopia. According to Wachiradetsakul (n.d 1), dystopias focus on current situations while depicting a setting in the future. In the novel, Cedar describes how “whatever is actually occurring, there is constant breaking news about how it will be handled – speculation, really, concerning what comes next” (Erdrich 2017: 3). This is similar to the current political situation in the United States. Cedar’s parents discuss how “the president is talking about declaring a state of emergency” (Erdrich 2017: 8). This can also be compared to today.

Wilson (2018: 1) argues that dystopias are created to warn the audience by describing an unpleasant or extreme scenario. Here it can be seen in fears about the loss of literacy. Cedar writes that “I fear we are heading into a lightless future devoid of the written word” (Erdrich 2017: 31). Cedar is worried about what the future holds for humanity and more specifically, her child. Cedar’s parents warn her that “things are taking a more ominous turn, though I don’t think people realize it yet” (Erdrich 2017: 8). This warns the audience about what might happen. Cedar continues to write “I feel that, instead of the past, it is the future that haunts us now” (Erdrich 2017: 63). Cedar believes the

future is so disturbing “that to give in at all to my imagination is enough to cause a full-blown panic attack” (Erdrich 2017: 69). What is most haunting is the unknowability. As Cedar’s partner Phil says, “the first thing that happens at the end of the world is that we don’t know what is happening” (Erdrich 2017: 93).

The structure of this novel is one of the main characteristics that defines it as a feminist dystopia. The novel is written in the format of a personal diary that Cedar writes to her future child. The novel includes a few letters from other people in her life as well. Cedar starts her first entry with:

When I tell you that my name is Cedar Hawk Songmaker and that I am the adopted child of Minneapolis liberals, and that when I went looking for my Ojibwe parents and found that I was born Mary Pots I hid the knowledge, maybe you’ll understand. (Erdrich 2017: 3)

This limited point of view constricts the audience to only know the feelings and emotions of the main character telling the story. As Desmet (2010: 78) explains, female authors try to create a dominate language through which they can fully express themselves. This creates an extremely personal voice that the reader follows and grows with throughout the novel. Cedar continues with confessing that “nearly a decade ago and almost two months into my first pregnancy, I had an abortion. I am telling you this because it is important you know everything” (Erdrich 2017: 3). The author is allowing the audience into the main character’s thoughts, to build trust between the character and the audience.

One extremely personal account is when Cedar describes her friend Tia’s birth, which in the end, does not end well:

Tia’s bleeding. She delivers the placenta, but keeps on bleeding. I squeeze her hands. Raise her hips. “Stop bleeding. Stop bleeding. Stop bleeding.” I say this in a commanding voice, and I glare at Tia fiercely, as if it is her fault. And her eyes open. She looks at me sweetly.” (184)

The emotionally wrenching description of the birth goes for two pages, putting the audience in a very vulnerable position of witnessing something so intimate. The audience feels for the characters and gets pulled into Cedar’s thoughts and emotions.

Also, Cedar describes the intimate relationship between her baby and herself and compares it to a pomegranate seed in a glass of water. She describes how “there seems to be a loving relationship between the pomegranate and the water glass” (Erdrich 2017: 172). She then says that “perhaps, I think now, like the relationship between you and me. You decided to exist. I don’t really figure into your decision. Life is all for life” (Erdrich 2017: 172). The audience feels the close connection a mother has with her baby.

Another aspect of feminist dystopia is, as Klingensmith (2016: 1) mentioned, that it uses science fiction elements to explore different scenarios, adding the discussion of nature. We can see references to nature and science in some scenes. Cedar writes “I think of the neurons in your brain connecting, branching, forming the capacity I hope you will have for wonder. They are connecting like galaxies” (Erdrich 2017: 106) and later discusses Darwin by saying “in their eyes, evolution makes life on earth a scenario of bloody, ham-handed, ruthless, tooth-and-nail struggle” (Erdrich 107). Erdrich uses scientific elements combined with evolution to talk about her pregnancy.

Erdrich brings science and nature into the story while maintaining a strong female voice. According to Margery (2014:123-124), feminist dystopia allows authors to test out certain scenarios as they might play out. Feminist science fiction tends to focus on reproduction and mothering. Jennings (2008: 65-66) argues that because women’s reproductive rights are historically privileged as the defining factor of female identity, motherhood becomes a sacred concept and the womb becomes a sacred place. This is then used to subjugate women. In the novel, Cedar describes a moment about a pregnant woman she saw, “they must have noticed that the pregnant woman was strikingly pretty, and her smooth rounded belly made her even more sweetly vulnerable” (Erdrich 2017: 75). The idea of vulnerability shows that while on the surface a pregnant woman may seem

powerful and beautiful, pregnancy also makes her weak. Cedar writes about how women were being recruited:

I wonder if you have the courage to save the country we love. We need you to be a Patriot. We need you to volunteer. If you are a woman, if you are pregnant, go to any of our Future Home Reception Centers. WV. Our chefs are waiting for you! (Erdrich 2017: 90)

She continues to describe how “all embryos are sacred” (Erdrich 2017: 90). This exemplifies how the sacredness and power of the womb are used against women. Women are recruited for pregnancy as a patriotic duty. It seems to put women in an empowered status, but it only brings about guilt and control. Later in the novel, when Cedar is with her birth family and hiding from the authorities, one of her family member’s, Eddy, talks about how “we are not giving up our pregnant tribal members. Our women are sacred to us” (Erdrich 2017: 227). This shows how the status of women has gone from metaphorical to literal. When Cedar is in the hospital the first time, she is given a pill each morning which she later finds out only makes the hospital food and all its amenities seem like a place of care for the mother and the baby, but as she is told by her roommates to stop taking it, the quality of care and kindness drop significantly:

...and the food tastes horrible now. Lunch is a tan piece of seared flesh-substance, with canned beans and a quarter of a rotten tomato, a plastic bowl of cold, white pudding. I can’t believe I ate this food and liked it- that drug was awesome. (Erdrich 2017: 131)

All that matters in the hospital is giving birth and the mother is disregarded entirely. The pill masks the disgust of the hospital. When Cedar is in the Birthing Center, she notices that the walls are covered with pictures of women and how they are “alert, smiling, hopeful, perfectly made up” (Erdrich 2017: 253) and below each photo it says “*She served the future*” (Erdrich 2017: 254). In a literal sense, the photos displayed those who did their duty. In a similar direction, during WWII, women were given a higher status if they reproduced and this example shows how women’s duty is strictly limited to reproduction, not actions in the public sphere. Cedar writes that:

Pregnant women will be sequestered in hospitals in order to give birth under controlled circumstances. It is for our own safety and we are required to go voluntarily. Those who do go in right now will receive the best rooms. The best rooms! (Erdrich 2017: 72)

This makes it seem that if women willingly give themselves up, they will be rewarded for doing what they were supposedly meant to do. At one point towards the end of the novel, before Cedar is captured again, her partner Phil describes his viewpoint on containing women: “after all, it’s a global crisis, it’s the future of humanity, so you can see why they need to keep an eye on women” (Erdrich 2017: 246). Phil believes that women can save the world and makes it seem that Cedar is special. Despite being her partner, he is the one who turns her in to the authorities. He continues with telling Cedar that:

You have a treasure, Cedar, if our baby is normal. We would be in charge of things. Rich. Super rich! We’d be safe. If we somehow worked out genetically, I mean, to have a normal child the sky’s the limit for us. We could seize power and found a dynasty, I say, meaning it sarcastically. (Erdrich 2017: 246-247)

Phil is treating this future baby like an inheritance, a sacred item that can be exchanged for a large sum of money that would fix all their problems. As Mercer (2015: 249) mentioned, dystopian writing authored by women warns the audience about the control of a woman’s fertility by males.

Religion is one of the main elements of this feminist dystopian novel. It combines religion and reproduction and shows what would happen if things were to be taken to the extreme. Similarly to what Kouhestani (2012: 131) mentioned when discussing *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Erdrich’s novel also follows the structure of a dystopia since it displays a lack of freedom, constant surveillance, impossibility of escape, and a hierarchical categorization of society. To have control over this, religion is used as a tool. This is similar to feminist dystopia in general, as argued by Nordström (2008). Religion starts to emerge as a topic when Cedar is flipping through the TV channels and “there are no brown people, anywhere, not in movies not on sitcoms not on shopping channels or on the dozens of evangelical channels up and down the remote” (Erdrich 2017: 44). The evangelical

channels have complete control over what is shown to the public. Cedar and Phil start to discuss what is happening and Cedar asks who is in charge and Phil's answer is that it is God (Erdrich 2017: 88). Cedar reacts with "that was the most terrifying thing I'd ever heard" (Erdrich 2017: 88). Religious fundamentalism is also tied to race, as it excludes non-white people.

A major incident in the book is when the street names change:

They are now...he stumbles. Well, they're Bible verses. I don't live on Boutwell Street anymore? Well, you do according to the U.S. Postal Service. They're still operating under a secular postmaster general. Otherwise, you live on Proverbs 10:7. (101)

The removal of the original street names is a major way in which religion is used to control a society, as secular and religious language are blended publicly and forcibly.

Another major shift is when the churches gain a new usage and Phil says "all the churches are going to be required for federal use. Federal? Like there's a government? A church government. The Church of the New Constitution" (108). The main element of the novel is the blending of government and religion which, to an extent, reflects the current political situation in the United States. The ideals and beliefs of some religious groups have come too close to the law. In the novel, we see a complete merging of the two. As Cedar is in the hospitals she finds out that City Hall has become the headquarters of the Unborn

Protection Society and they haul people there in old UPS trucks for "truth seminars":

These truth seminars can only be administered by ordained ministers and overseen by the military. They are conducted according to certain laws-precedents set by the church a few centuries back have come in handy. (Erdrich 2017: 191)

These truth seminars are to make people confess if they know of any pregnant women who are in hiding. The military is fused with religious power, creating a strong image of control. As the story continues, the church becomes even more powerful and Cedar finds out that "the Church of the New Constitution has split the military" and that "there is a whole city underneath St. Paul now, in hospitals, universities, old convents, the

state capitol, all connected underground” (Erdrich 2017: 222). In the same description, Cedar writes about how the church is using drones to spy on people as well. As the story unfolds, the religious groups begin to control more of the secular areas. This can be connected with Miceli’s (2018: 99) idea that the government’s fixation on what they perceived to be family was not just the defense of tradition but also a fix to the social problems which, in the case of this novel, is the decrease in the number of normal babies. The agenda of creating what is believed to be normal families leads to the merging of government and religious power. The government uses religion to make reproductive rights more limited.

The novel shows hypocrisy hidden within religion. When Cedar is captured at the end of the book by a religious couple they say:

I’m sorry, she says. We’re broke, so dead broke, and we have kids. We need the money. For turning me in? She doesn’t answer, just snuffles and groans. Will you pray with me? She asks in a hopeful voice. You are a monster with no soul, I answer. Now don’t get all testy on us... (Erdrich 2017: 249)

The religious couple take a pregnant woman hostage and use her for ransom but then proceed to ask her to pray with them. As mentioned before, religion is meant for spreading kindness and understanding, but here it is shown in a much darker light. In one of the last scenes in the book when Cedar is in the Birthing Center, the women gather to watch the one channel that is on TV called “Mother” and she says:

You are here because you did something wrong, she says, but this is a place of forgiveness. Open you heart! Your mind! Your body and your soul! Accept life. You can be absolved of anything you did, you can completely win back God’s love, by contributing to the future of humanity. Your happy sentence is only nine months. (Erdrich 2017: 255)

At the end of novel, it is stressed that women have committed a sin and giving birth is the “happy sentence” (Erdrich 2017: 255) in which they must serve to be absolved of all their sins and God will forgive them. It is by giving birth that they will do that and contribute to the future of the world.

However, the extreme end is contrasted with a more positive light. Cedar herself is religious and uses faith throughout the novel as a way of connecting and understanding and she channels some of that religious perspective into the Catholic magazine she writes for called *Zeal*. The word zeal means having a great enthusiasm for a cause, and from a religious perspective, it means devotion to God or a religious cause. As shown so far, the main religion in the novel has zeal for obtaining all women for reproduction and having absolute control over women's bodies. It lacks something vital: love and wonder. Cedar's faith is different from the dominant religion in the book in that she is not hypocritical in her actions. While she has beliefs, she also does not know if she truly is right or wrong. She has an open-minded approach. Cedar writes that:

For here I am, maybe a walking contradiction, maybe two species in one body. Nobody knows. A woman, a dweeb, a geek, a pregnant degreeless dilettante straddling not just millennia but epochs. (Erdrich 2017: 66)

She calls herself a “fledgling Catholic” (Erdrich 2017: 66) showing that Cedar herself believes she is inexperienced in her faith. She is open to the fact that there are things she does not know. Cedar also writes about Catholicism and evolution in her magazine and describes “how evolution has never been a very controversial part of Catholic discourse” and that “Catholics would not betray their religion by believing what science has determined about the evolution of the human body just as long as they accepted God was responsible for infusing that body with a soul” (Erdrich 2017: 189). Cedar tries to connect the realms of science and religion rather than disregarding one or the other. They can both exist in tandem. As mentioned before, Cedar joined her church to rebel against her adoptive parents, but later began to appreciate her faith. Cedar writes, “I love my church. It is a humble place – no limestone cathedral, no basilica. It doesn't even have the name of a saint...it is very different from the exurb Protestant churches that I have also attended...” (Erdrich 2017: 70). Cedar is emphasizing how her faith is not superficial and less focused

on worship on taking the teachings and applying them to life as each person chooses to do so. It shows how institutionalized religion can lose a vital aspect. It is not about being bold and proud, but being humble and thoughtful. Her magazine is an outlet for her to connect with others without taking away a very human aspect. Cedar's zeal differs from that of the dominant religion in that it has the same enthusiasm, but her drive contains love and wonder.

This brings us to the topic of language and how it is used in the novel. In one of her magazine issues Cedar talks about "Incarnation. My issue will examine the breadth of thought on how Christ's divinity was made flesh. What could resonate more with what is happening right now" (Erdrich 2017: 65)? Cedar can use what is going on around her in the world and filter it through her religious perspective and back out to the world. She takes the dark side and adds more light and hope. In another text for the *Zeal* she writes:

For I am the first and the last. I am the honored and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. Perhaps it is this voice, I think, so arrogant and so alive, using antithesis to cause in the reader's mind the romantic dissonance that occurs when one attempts to comprehend the unknowable. (66)

As Elsa Klingensmith (2016: 1) stated, there is a tendency for women writers to emphasize characters and issues that were previously silenced and omitted from the narrative by male authors. In discussing the concept of Incarnation, Cedar discusses an academic paper she had recently read called "The Madonna's Conception Through the Ear":

It is an examination of the belief that God's whispered breath caused the Incarnation...What did he say...What was the word that just did it for Mary...The word intrigues me, now more than ever, the idea of a word so uncanny, a word so powerful, a word actually so divine that its expression infuses a women's body with a pregnancy of godly nature. (Erdrich 2017: 64)

This example shows how the utterance of just one word from God brought about the creation of a life within Mary, just that one word. Cedar takes the Virgin Mary and gives her a story when the focus is mainly on God, the creator. This preoccupies Cedar with the idea that:

...outside the actual human experience of words spoken, words thought, there exists a language or perhaps a pre-language made up of words so unthinkable holy they cannot be said, much less known. (Erdrich 2017: 65)

The author is highlighting the power of language and suggesting that there is language beyond our knowing. Cedar thinks there is possibly a word that changed human existence and that “a word written in the depths of things, a word within the quantum and genetic and synaptic codes... (Erdrich 2017: 65) In one text, Cedar says “what if the word ‘love’ is to vanish from the world” (Erdrich 2017: 53)? The language Cedar uses about her own body and pregnancy is very intimate and passionate. The world around Cedar is terrified of the unknown and the possibility of abnormal births, but Cedar is confident. Cedar writes, discussing how her mother will react to the baby:

... my heart pumping fast with a love that is burning richer and hotter with every fresh new cell of blood, every icy flash of neuron, a love of you, a love of everything. Fierce, merciless, sticking to the world like blazing tar, this love expands. And I’m thinking-of course you will be happy when you see the baby, yes, you will be overjoyed. He is the light of this world! (Erdrich 2017: 209)

Despite the drastic changes in pregnancy and birth, Cedar remains positive about her own. This describes the unconditional love that a mother has for her child. Cedar knows that regardless of what her child turns out to be, he or she will be loved. When Cedar talks about her own body as it is transforming, she says that she is “overcome with the sin and embarrassment of pride” (Erdrich 2017: 200) when she looks in a real mirror for the first time because the hospital mirrors were made of reflective steel. Her face was a “blur” (Erdrich 2017: 200) and she has not been able to look at herself. The inability of pregnant women to see themselves properly takes away the beauty from pregnancy. The government wants to take away the magnificence of birth and change it to something that is just seen as a duty. She marvels at herself and says “you’re this giant ball, hard and resilient, sticking straight out over my skinny legs. It is a shame to cover up such glory” (Erdrich 2017: 201). While the world around Cedar is making pregnancy something to be

controlled and ashamed of, Cedar sees the glory of the experience, not succumbing to the attitude that is spreading all around her.

In regards to literal communication and language in the novel, the form of writing letters becomes one of the only reliable means of communication. The states which decided not to support the current central government link the Postal Service and the National Guard. Cedar writes that “the entire mail operation is funded by the cash exchange between the customer and the mail carrier. The postal worker takes the cash and pays the National Guard outright for protection” (Erdrich 2017: 94).

The means of communication have gone backwards similarly to evolution. The means of communication have become more restricted which leads to silencing. It is, as Cavalcanti (2000: 1) had shown, an example of how linguistic control symbolically stands for other forms of control. Continuing with this example, phones have also stopped being used and are being piled in landfills. In some towns, to get the news people run from specific posts to relay information and news and they run back like “old town criers” (Erdrich 2017: 223). Communication is spread by a multitude of people and most probably getting distorted the farther it travels. Cedar worries that everyone is “heading into a lightless future devoid of the written word” (Erdrich 2017: 31). In the hospital, there was no phone service for the women to contact anyone in the outside world. These examples expose the linguistic manipulation that, as Desmet (2010: 39) discussed, is a reoccurring theme in dystopian novels.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed Louise Erdrich’s *Future Home of the Living God* as a feminist dystopian novel. The novel is connected with the long history of women’s rights in the United States and also the merging of politics and religion. Although the USA has

historically practiced the separation of church and state, religion has become more powerful in politics in the past few decades, especially after the controversy of *Roe v Wade*. After this, the blending of religion and politics became more visible to the public eye. The legalization of abortion was the main driver of evangelical religion groups because it threatened their ideal of the typical nuclear family that limited women to their biological roles and the position of a housewife.

Previous research has demonstrated that dystopias depict extreme scenarios stemming from a major issue and show the possible outcome. They tend to be classified as science fiction because they are a great vehicle to express progressive social theories. Feminist dystopias take that idea, but add another layer. Science fiction tends to focus on male-centered quest narratives, but feminist dystopias use science fiction to emphasize women and nature without disregarding technology.

Dystopias can also be seen as stories about language and the tendency for women writers to be silenced. Therefore, women writers tend to emphasize characters and issues that were previously silenced. Feminist writers have also turned their attention to the blend of American politics and fundamentalism. Feminist writers warn the audience about the control of a woman's fertility and, as a result, the full control of women.

Louise Erdrich's novel *Future Home of the Living God* is a feminist dystopia that is written in the format of a personal diary. Cedar, the protagonist, writes to her future child, documenting the pregnancy and everything going on around her. The author uses this personal format to make a connection with the audience. This personal point of view limits the audience to feel only the emotions and thoughts of the main character. This gives the main character a dominant voice to tell her story and guide the reader.

Using this voice, Erdrich uses dystopian elements to discuss reproduction and mothering and the sacred status that the womb has been given. She shows how it gives

false sense of power to women. Finally, Erdrich makes religion one of the main elements of the novel. The changing of street names to Bible verses and changing the Federal government to a Church government are some ways in which religion has bled into politics and affected society, more specifically women. Erdrich shows how the government uses religion as a tool to manipulate reproduction and have control over women. This is viewed as a statement about the present situation in our world. However, the novel also shows that religion is not all bad or negative. Cedar's faith is shown in a positive light and is expressed through her magazine, *Zeal*, where she writes about her faith. The contrast of Cedar's personal faith versus the religion in the novel shows how religion can be used for personal growth and connecting with others and not only for manipulation and control.

Overall, Erdrich creates an intimate and powerful voice in *Future Home of the Living God* through the main character Cedar. She combines different elements of dystopian fiction and discusses reproduction, language, and religious manipulation. Erdrich creates a story that represents the long and ongoing political struggle for reproductive rights in the United States and how religion has come to be used negatively and control women's rights.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Teele Helene Männik

Giving Women's Bodies Back to Women: Representation of Religion and Women's Rights in *Future Home of the Living God*

Naiskeha Omandiõigus: Religiooni ja Naiste Õiguste Kujutamine Teoses *Future Home of the Living God*

Bakalaureusetöö

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Religioonil ja Ameerika Ühendriikide valitsusel on pikk konfliktiderohke ajalugu ning nende seotus on tänaseni päevakajaline teema, eriti naise keha ja aborti reguleerivate seaduste kontekstis. Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida Louise Erdrichi teoses *Future Home of the Living God* esinevaid feministliku düstopia elemente ja uurida kuidas teoses väljendub praegune poliitiline ja religioosne pinge seoses naiste õigustega. Peamine eesmärk on analüüsida, kuidas Erdrich on loonud düstopilise maailma, milles peegeldub Ameerika Ühendriikide ühiskonna hetkeseis.

Bakalaureusetöö sissejuhatus annab ülevaate naiste õigustest tänapäeval ning näitab kuidas neid on mõjutanud religiooni üha suurem roll poliitikas. Teoreetiline osa annab ülevaate utoopilistest ja düstoopilistest elementidest kirjanduses. Analüüs toob näiteid sellest, mis teevad Erdrichi romaanist feministliku düstopia. Analüüsist selgus, et teoses *Future Home of the Living God* on mitmeid feministliku düstopia elemente, näiteks looduse ja teaduse segunemine ilma, et naiste tähtsus jääks tagaplaanile.

Märksõnad: ameerika kirjandus, ameerika ühiskond, feministlik düstopia, naiste reproduktiivõigused, Louise Erdrich

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